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## **Donald Trump and Trumpism: leadership, ideology and narrative of the business executive turned politician**

During the latter stages of the 2016 American election campaign, libertarian billionaire Peter Thiel claimed that Americans supportive of Donald Trump's candidacy—including himself—were taking Trump 'seriously but not literally' (Yarow, 2016), which implied that those opposed to Trump's candidacy took him literally but not seriously. This narrative ambiguity discursively situated Trump as a cipher to deeper meaning and a canvas onto which others projected their ambitions for America. Trump's campaign slogan—'Make America Great Again'—was an invocation of a nostalgic, imagined, and inherently conservative past, and offered a glimpse of the ambitious agenda to re-organize American institutions that lay at its heart. Two years on, the evisceration of the Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare"), the passing of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, the withdrawal of the USA from the Paris Climate Accord, the emerging trade war with China, the elevation of conservative jurist Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court of the United States, and the controversy surrounding the candidacy of Brett Kavanaugh to the same body, are the most well-known examples of this ambition (Béland, Rocco, and Waddan, 2018; Chang, 2018; Noland, 2018; Urpelainen and Van de Graaf, 2018). It is now indisputable that Trump needs to be taken seriously.

Researchers are also now seeking to understand *Trumpism* as an emerging ideology (Blyth, 2016). Here we draw upon Van Dijk's definition of ideology as 'a form of social cognition shared by the members of a group', a 'cognitive framework' which 'assigns coherence among social attitudes which in turn codetermine social practice' and which 'embod[ies] an interest-dependent (re)construction of social reality' (Van Dijk, 2008: 34-35). Our contribution in this article is to explore how Trumpism is a syncretic amalgam of a particular narrative of Trump's business career and an articulation of right-wing populist rhetoric mixed with previously fringe conservative philosophies. We argue that management and organization studies, bringing an understanding and critique of leadership, institutional change, power, resistance and

inequalities (Bristow and Robinson, 2018; De Cleen et al., 2018), is well placed to conceptualize Trumpism as it has blended discursive structures and narratives of leadership from both business and politics, and can be analysed drawing from both fields of study. Further, for management and organization studies scholars, it is necessary to understand how Trump's particular understanding of business, leadership and success have so quickly become embedded in the organization of government and are being used as a lever for substantial institutional change.

The article is organized as follows. The first section provides an outline of Trump's business career and identifies the key narrative themes used to articulate Trumpism and Trump as politician. Personal stories of a candidate's life are a feature of American presidential campaigns (Barra, 2017; Burns, 2006). They are used to establish credibility, legitimacy, and a narrative for the suitability of the candidate and their ability to embody and implement an approach to policy when in office. These stories form discourses that 'co-create the context to which they and others must respond' (Fairhurst, 2009: 1608).

The second section brings together Trump (his career history and identity) and the ideology of Trumpism to understand the marketing of Trump as candidate and president. Here we discuss the importance of Steve Bannon as he understood how these two facets could be packaged in a populist rhetoric that would appeal to a large section of the electorate (Green, 2017). This marketing appeal built on Trump's prior celebrity, in particular his starring role in the reality TV programme, *The Apprentice*. His regular and long-lasting media profile facilitated the demonstration of his supposed leadership style and familiarized the public with his rhetorical strategies. This has been described as a right-wing mediatized spectacle (Hall, Goldstein and Ingram, 2016).

This paper explores in more detail Trump's business career and its constructed narrative and, then, how this narrative is used, along with right-wing populist ideas, to construct Trump as a viable leader and Trumpism as an emerging ideology. In this

special paper series Spector and Wilson (2018), argue that Trump demands that we think differently about leadership as he exemplifies the problems of the dominant discourse of transformational leadership and the ways in which it can overlap with demagogic leadership. Similar to understandings of transformational leadership, Trump utilised a particular reading of his business career to present himself as the heroic and exceptional leader—a ‘personification of American ‘greatness’” (Spector and Wilson, 2018: 789). We understand leadership here from a discursive perspective where Trump’s identity as leader is co-constructed by Trump, senior advisors such as Steve Bannon and, importantly, by commentators and the public who envision Trump, whether reasonably or not, within a particular framing. Goethals (2017), following the work of Gardener (1995), argues that ‘leaders influence followers through stories, particularly their stories about a group’s identity, and that her or his story competes with “counterstories”’ (Goethals, 2017: 418). Our argument is that Trump was able to use *his own* narrative of business success to appeal to his electoral base. As leadership is constructed through legitimating narratives (Fairhurst, 2009; Goethals, 2017; Spector and Wilson, 2018), Tourish (2019) further argues that as leadership is communicatively co-constructed, the leader and follower identities are unstable and evolving. Within the context of populist personalistic leadership this is particularly precarious, unpredictable and shifting because of the emphasis on a charismatic character and support from followers as opposed to a coherent ideology or embeddness in established institutions (Weyland, 2017). Thus, as the second section of this paper argues, Trump must utilise both traditional and social media in order to maintain his leadership via direct communication with his followers in order to sustain the constructed identities and create a semblance of cohesion to the ideology.

### **Part 1: Trump—a stylized business/career history**

In the analysis below we provide a brief account of Trump’s business/career. It is necessarily stylized and partial. It is based on a critical reading of three main biographies (D’Antonio, 2016; Johnston, 2016; Kranish and Fisher, 2016) as well as additional news sources. This approach is what Fischer (Fischer, 1997: 18) calls

'constructed evidence', selected 'specifically to address a question', in this case how Trump's history reflects his approach to politics, and how this narratively fits into Trump's alignment with the emerging ideology to which his name is associated.

Trump's career can be divided into three phases. The first, lasting from the early 1970s until the mid/late-1980s was as a real estate entrepreneur, focusing mainly on New York and Atlantic City. The second was from the late 1980s. Following financial distress, banks bailed out Trump, and his control over his business was heavily mediated by the influence of financial institutions. Then, third, from the late 1990s onwards, Trump's fortunes were transformed by his emergence as a reality TV celebrity and the development of the Trump brand. We argue that Trump based his business 'success' on seeking preferential advantages, tax breaks, bailouts, value extraction, and risk transference, often seeing value in economic decay, and holding a zero-sum or even negative-sum view of economic transactions.

The formative experience of Trump's business career was in New York in the late 1970s. Amid substantial economic decline (Tabb, 1982) and desperate for urban renewal, the city was prepared to offer developers tax deals and subsidies, something Trump exploited. The first major project in this period was to redevelop the faded Commodore hotel, an asset of the bankrupt Penn Central Railroad. To do this Trump needed tax breaks, capital, and a management company to run the hotel:

Trump played the city, the sellers, and the hotel chain off one another, using one to leverage a deal with the other. He assured Penn Central's negotiators that he had a solid deal with Hyatt when he had no such thing, and the railroad gave him a nonbinding, exclusive opportunity to buy the \$10 million property (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 75).

Another key event in this early period was a Justice Department suit against the Trumps for racial bias in the selection of tenants for housing they owned (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 63). Though the case was 'a complete loss for Trump' (Johnston, 2016:

39) and found in favour of the Justice Department, Trump nonetheless presented the outcome as a win, claiming variously that the 'government couldn't prove its case' and that in settling he had made 'no admission of anything' (Johnston, 2016: 39; Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 68). The case gave a foretaste of three classic Trump stratagems: aggressive counter-attacking; a tactical withdrawal and settlement; and media spin, regardless of the real outcome.

Trump's attraction to the opportunities offered by economic decay are also seen in the acquisition of casinos in the run-down coastal resort of Atlantic City in the 1980s. Once acquired, Trump redeveloped his casinos in a lavish way by loading them with high interest debt. This proved unsustainable as the casinos were not profitable enough. Combined with financial overextension elsewhere, by 1990 Trump reportedly owed \$3.2 billion, two thirds to Wall Street banks (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 193). The banks negotiated together to attempt to avoid a cascade of defaults by Trump (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 193), while 'Trump kept reminding them that, unless they gave him relief, they would all suffer together' (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 195). The deal that they eventually enforced restructured Trump's vast debt, including deferred interest payment on \$1 billion in loans. The cost to Trump was that many of his assets were either sold or placed under lien to the bankers (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 195–96). But Trump survived and remained involved in the management of the assets because his name was considered essential to their ongoing viability (Johnston, 2016: 93).

In 1995 Trump formed a publicly traded company to buy the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino. The capital raised from shareholders was used to buy Trump's two other distressed casinos, appropriating both the assets and their debt. Trump pocketed \$880,000 for arranging the deal, in which he was in reality both the buyer and the seller. Between 1995 and 2009 as variously CEO and Chairman of the new firm, Trump was paid \$44 million, while at the same time the firm bought huge volumes of Trump branded merchandise—from Trump (Buettner and Bagli, 2016; Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 208).

As the company struggled to service its debt, the share price fell from a peak of \$35 dollars to less than \$1 dollar (Buettner and Bagli, 2016). As Kranish and Fisher observe, '[w]hile Trump was Chairman, the company lost more than \$1 billion and was in the red every year between 1995 and 2005' (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 207) and that '[h]olders of the company's stocks and bonds lost more than \$1.5 billion during Trump's management' (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 207–8). The firm entered bankruptcy in 2004, and despite that Trump remained as Chairman when it exited bankruptcy, after a re-organization where the shareholders and bondholders took the main haircut (Buettner and Bagli, 2016; Kranish and Fisher, 2016, 208). Along with other notable failures<sup>1</sup> there is little to suggest that Trump's record in business was anything other than decidedly mixed.

Trump's fortunes improved in the 2000s in great part due to The Apprentice TV series. There is no doubt at all that this was a considerable success, cementing the public image of Trump as a rich and decisive business leader (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 210–39). The struggles of the 1990s had led to an effective consolidation of Trump's business interests. The core of Trump's empire are fifteen properties in Manhattan (Bagli, 2016), where he owns either the entirety of the properties, or has long-term leases which amount to the same, or has substantial co-ownership (Tully, 2016).

The global expansion of the Trump brand since the early 2000s has been remarkable. According to newspaper reports, Trump owns or controls over 500 assets in over twenty countries across the World (Helderman and Hamburger, 2015; Time-Staff, 2017). However, in many instances this is via a licensing arrangement, with the levels of equity holdings opaque and potentially non-existent. Such arrangements are present in a number of developments, including in Canada, Egypt, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, Turkey, the UAE and Uruguay (Time-Staff, 2017). Similarly, Trump's activities 'have expanded well beyond real estate into the realm of branded developments and brand marketing ... the Trump name has been deployed in recent years to market not only high-end development projects but also a range of

consumer goods from mattresses to menswear, from water to wine' (Helderman and Hamburger, 2015). As Trump himself stated, '[t]he image I created through the media enabled me to build one of the greatest luxury brands in the world' (Trump, 2015: 12).

While Trump has taken credit for this, and has financially benefitted from the licensing levies, it has also enabled him to walk away from failing enterprises without any personal or organizational liability (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 224). This in part explains how Trump was able to survive the Global Financial Crisis, the greatest downturn in the American real estate market since the Great Depression. Though several Trump branded real estate projects went bust in this period, Trump hadn't personally invested in them (for example, in the failed Trump Towers project in Atlanta, or the Trump Ocean Resort in Baja, Mexico) (Johnston, 2016: 169–78; Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 228).

Across his career it is estimated that Trump benefitted from tax breaks worth at least \$885 million in New York City alone (Bagli, 2016), and in other respects Trump has benefitted from state largesse in many of the deals he has made. It has recently been suggested by the *New York Times* that Trump's tax planning may have stretched what was legal, something that Trump's representatives deny (Barstow, Craig, and Buettner, 2018). Over the years Trump has been heavily involved in hundreds of litigations and has used the law to pursue his commercial agenda, often overwhelming his opponents through a combination of aggression, attrition, and deep pockets (D'Antonio, 2016; Johnston, 2016; Kranish and Fisher, 2016). When Trump suffered failure or loss, he would claim victory, and has proved to be an adept media operator. His ex-post renegotiation of both debt and commercial deals represents a very different understanding to the supposition of mutual benefit that underpins liberal (and even libertarian) conceptions of market capitalism.

What provides conceptual unity to these themes in Trump's career is a zero-sum (or even negative sum) approach to organizational and business relationships. This perspective may well have its roots in the nature of real estate transactions which–



unlike the production of goods and services—add little on-going economic value after the initial deal, and instead merely provide a mechanism to collect economic rents. In the 1980s Tony Schwartz ghost-wrote *The Art of the Deal* for Trump (Trump and Schwartz, 1987). He later commented that:

To survive, I concluded from our conversations, Trump felt compelled to go to war with the world. It was a binary, zero-sum choice for him: You either dominated or you submitted. You either created and exploited fear, or you succumbed to it (Schwartz, 2017).

This zero-sum world-view held by Trump is therefore both long-lasting and deep. This perspective—in evidence throughout his business career—also helps explain his approach to politics, such as his protectionist instincts on trade, and his consistent and long-held belief that international allies such as Japan (and more recently South Korea) 'had been "taking advantage" of US military protection' (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 191). During the 2016 Presidential campaign Trump developed a consistent and electorally compelling critique of contemporary America that was 'losing':

We lose to China. We lose to Mexico both in trade and at the border. We lose to Russia and Iran and Saudi Arabia (Trump, 2015: 9).

In juxtaposition, Trump drew on a highly selective historical account of his own business career and leadership ability:

I realized that with my well-known success story and record of building residential and office buildings and developing public spaces—all while accumulating personal wealth—I could inspire people to help create the most massive turnaround in American history (Trump, 2015: 4).

...

I'm not bragging when I say that I am a winner. I have experience in winning. That's what we call leadership (Trump, 2015: 9).

This narrative was one of American decline against which Trump had been successful—through his expertise in turnaround and having the right leadership skills. Trump’s own articulation of his business career situated him as uniquely experienced even while lacking a traditional political track record. Thus, his narrated leadership mythos becomes an enabling 'Discourse-cum-repertoire' (Fairhurst, 2009: 1619) that allows Trump to be seen by some as the embodiment of necessary change. This particularly appealed to those Americans who felt that they were not receiving what they deserved (Hochschild, 2016). This 'psychology of relative deprivation' is connected to Trump’s leadership by Goethals who argues that this was used to motivate Trump's supporter base by appealing to their 'self-enhancing self-evaluations' (Goethals, 2018: 3) where Trump would praise a group of potential supporters (like white-working class voters without a college degree or police officers) and then criticise another group claiming that they were taking from or benefitting off the first group (Goethals, 2017). Trump combined this 'relative deprivation' with his 'zero-sum' worldview to present himself as the leader best positioned to correct this 'inbalance'. Put more simply, Trump could address his base's *perception* of inequality, *perception* of economic decline, and get them a *better deal*—even if the reality of Trump's economic policies is contrary to the rhetoric. Understanding further how these attributes made Trump into the figure-head of a political movement requires us now to examine the ideological context of right-wing thought in America and his particular populist celebrity appeal.

## **Part 2: The populist appeal of Trumpism**

Wodak identifies three characteristics of a successful right-wing populist movement: (1) the invocation of a national 'heartland' (or 'homeland'); (2) the identification of a 'pure' community associated with the heartland who are situated antagonistically to 'others' not from the heartland, often immigrants; and (3) a 'distancing dynamic' which 'sustains an antagonistic relationship between "the people", "the elites" and "the (dangerous) others"' (Wodak 2015, 26). Similarly, Engesser et al. outline five features

of populism as ‘sovereignty of the people, advocating for the people, attacking the elite, ostracizing others, and invoking the ‘heartland’ (2017: 1109). All of these are present in Trump's campaign and presidency. It seems incongruous that a professed billionaire would be able to motivate support with this rhetoric (though others, such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, have done something similar). We argue that it is Trump's business background as outlined above along with drawing upon previously fringe views from the far-right that created a semblance of narrative consistency in the positioning of Trump as the *kind* of businessman within a particular historical period in the United States who could fulfil these right-wing populist aspirations.

Before Trump, the Tea Party mobilized support with a similar rhetoric within which anger, rather than fear, was the emotional key (Smith and Hanley, 2018: 13). Wahl-Jorgensen has described this rhetoric as ‘angry populism’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018: 766). The mobilization of this anger in Trumpian populism is connected ideologically to the bringing into mainstream discourse ideas which had recently been considered on the fringe. Further, it is the success of the Tea Party in moving Republicans to the right that has opened up connections with the far-right (rebranded as ‘Alt-right’).

A leading advocate of a repetitious hostility to migrants, foreigners and elites in the Trump campaign was Steve Bannon, who briefly served Trump after the election as Chief Strategist in the White House, and it is he who instrumentalized a means for Trump to appeal to large numbers of Americans. Bannon is enigmatic, holding a world-view that can simultaneously draw on racist tropes (for example his repeated citation of *The Camp of the Saints*, an obscure and extremely racist 1973 novel that describes how Europe becomes over-run with non-white immigrants (Blumenthal and Rieger 2017a; Blumenthal and Rieger 2017b)), while also being critical of the white supremacist leaders of the Alt-right. While Bannon denies that he is himself a white supremacist, he appears to hold a highly antagonistic view of a "clash of civilizations" where immigration is weakening a Judeo-Christian West (Blumenthal and Rieger 2017b).

Bannon is also an enthusiast for the pseudo-historical and pseudo-scientific "Strauss-Howe generational theory" (Howe 2017) which interprets American history through a succession of 'generations' and makes predictions for the future unfolding of American history, including what they describe as 'the crisis of 2020'. This crisis (which might come before or after 2020) is conceived of as a severe social cataclysm that will be the 'pivotal moment' for all the different generations alive at that time:

The Crisis of 2020 will be a major turning point in American history and an adrenaline-filled moment of trial... Sacrifices will be asked and will be given. America will be implacably resolved to do what needs doing, and fix what needs fixing (W. Strauss and Howe 1991: 382).

For Bannon this imagined future crisis is both existential and essentialist. At a Republican conference in 2011 he stated that

[S]omewhere over the next 10 or 20 years, we're going to come through this crisis, and we're either going to be the country that was bequeathed to us or it's going to be something that's completely or totally different. ... [the] Judeo-Christian West is collapsing ... it's imploding on our watch. And the blowback of that is going to be tremendous (Blumenthal and Rieger, 2017a).

In an interview with the New York Times in 2017 Bannon claimed that '[e]verything President Trump is doing — all of it — is to get ahead of or stop any potential crisis' (Peters, 2017). Bannon's essentialism and desire to reassert what he considers to be traditional American values aligns closely with those people in the US that Wodak describes likely to be receptive to right-wing populism—the supposed 'losers' of modernization (whether real or imagined) (Wodak, 2015: 26). So, while Bannon and others imagine a crisis based on long-run historical trends, political principle, and some sense of American destiny (all of which have been deployed narratively by the Trump camp to garner support), there has also been a real crisis in the 'rust-belt' 'heartland' of middle America, within which these narratives have resonance. While

Clinton did better than Trump amongst low-income voters, Trump won in poorer areas of the country (Bump, 2017).

A key element of this are the ways in which economic development, globalization, and neo-liberal market reforms have caused substantial socio-economic dislocation. Mark Blyth's paper on "Global Trumpism" makes the point that neo-liberal reforms from the late 1970s onwards have led to falling real wages and rising personal and household debt. In this context, the gatekeepers of neo-liberalism (the Davos-class and the establishment Republicans and Democrats) are the beneficiaries of a regime based on anti-inflationary policies that have systematically undermined large sections of American society. As Blyth argues 'the debtors can't pay—but politically, and this is crucial—it empowers debtors since they can't pay, won't pay, and still have the right to vote' (Blyth, 2016). As Trump said 'I am the king of debt. I love debt' (Egan, 2016), with reference to his renegotiation of the terms of loans, and the frequent haircuts taken by lenders where he was concerned. This self-acclaimed mastery of an impersonal source, even cause, of widespread economic hardship—founded on Trump's business experience—is a further reason why Trump appeals to those who have endured that hardship (or perceive that they have)—that narratively, he stands up to and bests the impersonal forces that have caused individual destitution.

This narrative also builds a kind of solidarity between those who have endured hardship, those who believe they have endured, and those for whom the hardship of others – perhaps especially in their communities – fits into a world-view of the material and political decline of 'traditional' white America. Trump's success in the 2016 election and his continued support among his voter base is not straightforwardly connected to economic well-being or perceptions of economic well-being. Between the 2012 and 2016 elections economic anxiety amongst white voters actually declined (McElwee and McDaniel, 2017). In 2016, economic anxiety among non-white voters was greater than for white voters but this group did not predominately vote for Trump (McElwee and McDaniel, 2017). It therefore remains an open question as to how Trump was able to benefit from a narrative of economic hardship.

Hochschild's *Strangers in their own land* (Hochschild, 2016) sketches how there is a 'deep story' of resentment in communities that have not fared well in the last few decades, which has led them to feel they are the figurative 'strangers' of the title. This deep story involves notions of 'doing the right thing', working hard, of sacrifice and of being authentic Americans on the one hand, and in contrast—on the other—of waiting patiently in line while 'line cutters' (immigrants, refugees, minorities, women) 'cut ahead' by being given advantages and resources by the government. This resentment is also fuelled by notions that 'elites' patronize them and have shaped a narrative where sympathy *must* be felt towards the groups that the (usually left) elites have defined as oppressed. Trump's antipathy to 'political correctness' and the institutions of government which promote 'line cutting', and antipathy to those parts of the government which are seen as limiting growth or taking away jobs (particularly relating to environmental protection) create in those supporters of Trump a kind of cathartic 'elation' (Hochschild, 2016: 228) that, at last, *someone* understands the position that *white* America finds itself in.

Smith and Hanley concluded that Trump's supporters voted for him more because they shared his prejudices rather than because of *actual* financial strain and it was Trump's credibility, in their eyes, as a 'domineering leader who insults and thwarts 'line-cutter' that determined their loyalty' (Smith and Hanley, 2018: 13). Trump performs then a role as both critic of institutions, and a saviour of sorts where his business acumen will provide the salve. In an un-ironic echo of Gordon Gekko<sup>2</sup>, at a rally Trump is reported (by Hochschild, 2016: 244) as saying:

I've been greedy. I'm a businessman ... take, take, take. Now I'm going to be greedy for the United States (wild cheers).

The racist element of the rise of support for Trump is connected by Narayan to the decline in the 'wages of whiteness', or the historically situated benefit of being white in a global economy that had benefitted substantially from imperialism (Narayan,

2017) and, by implication, from slavery (Kendi, 2016; Roediger, 1999). The breakdown of this settlement has had the effect of racializing the political discourse of that decline, but also of shattering support for the neo-liberal plutocracy at the heart of American polity in the last thirty years (Narayan, 2017).

The documentary film-maker Michael Moore has commented that '[p]eople are upset. They're angry at the system and they see Trump — not so much that they agree with him — but they see him as the human Molotov cocktail that they get to toss into the system with Brexit and blow it up, send a message' (Wang, 2016). For those who feel they have already 'lost', the prospect of 'winning', of disruption, and radical re-organization becomes a more than symbolic act, it becomes a way of simultaneously holding contradictory positions and doing something about both. These zero-sum or negative-sum world-views allow both angry destructive impulses and aspiration (for me to win, others must lose; or, if I must lose, everyone should lose), of looking to an imaginary past as a guide to a nostalgic future (as much about Trump's supposed business acumen, as about the prosperity of the past and who benefitted from it), of seeking to re-organize and change the institutions of the Republic in order to save it.

Trump's pre-existing celebrity status was crucial to the feasibility of creating a convincing narrative of Trump as leader within this combination of far-right ideologies, right-wing populist rhetoric and business experience. Street (2018) argues that it is not sufficient to merely see Trump as a celebrity politician. Rather, it is necessary to focus on how Trump was not *just* well known, but known for 'doing particular things' (Street, 2018: 5). Gabriel et al. (2018) concluded that those who watched *The Apprentice/Celebrity Apprentice* had a stronger 'parasocial' bond with Trump and that this was the case regardless of whether or not they identified as a Republican. The character of Trump in these programmes with which they formed a bond was presented as already having the qualities of leadership necessary for the presidency. His presentation was 'decidedly presidential—he alone made the decisions about who would stay or go, his decisions were always right within the narrative of the show, and he was able to make the decision fairly and quickly' (Gabriel et al,

2018: 305). Trump was a familiar and popular face for decades before becoming a political candidate. He carried his pre-existing media personae into his right-wing populist rhetoric. His performances were compelling both to those who supported and opposed his candidacy and, further, Hall et al. (2017) credit his success to the extent that he was 'entertaining'. His spectacular performances such as his 'gestural enactments' (mocking a disabled journalist, for example) produced the 'comedic callousness that is central to his political persona' (Hall et al., 2017: 89).

Trump's celebrity identity and persona were further extended through his use of social media. Again, Trump's celebrity identity established through years in the public eye were combined with an understanding of how social media was a particularly effective medium for right-wing populist rhetoric. Gerbaudo (2018) describes how social media enables these movements to 'rally anger' against the mainstream media and that the algorithmic architecture of social media has enabled 'disgruntled individuals' to 'form online crowds' (Gerbaudo, 2018: 746). Engesser et al. (2017) similarly add that the populism spread via social media is fragmented and that it is often strategically 'ambiguous and malleable' (Gerbaudo, 2018: 1122) which also serves as an apt description of Trump's social media messages.

Thus, Trump entered politics with a pre-existing celebrity persona with which many of the public had already formed a positive bond. Trump as business leader, celebrity, and entertainer, provided a vehicle for otherwise non-mainstream views to be presented as accessible, acceptable, and familiar. A particular reading of his business career through the positive framing via *The Apprentice* positioned Trump as a credible and therefore viable national leader. This vision of Trump as a leader was particularly well suited to the social media that he embraced, and through this medium he legitimated, or liberated, sentiments and resentments previously understood as inappropriate in public discourse.

It is this combination of factors, along with a number of other external circumstances and influences, which, we argue, facilitated Trump's electoral success. These factors



are very much about the cultivation of an image and a particular framing of his identity - utilizing various forms of media - as legitimate and competent. We are not arguing here that he *is* competent nor that his business background *actually* makes him well suited for the role of president. We do argue that he is an effective political communicator, even if his style repulses many. He and his advisors have been able to articulate a message and galvanise support. Trump is both a symptom and a cause, he is the logical outcome of a long process, such as the growth of the Tea Party which we outline above, and his success is a reflection of deep resentment. He has ridden these sentiments to success. His administration, and his rhetoric, are also further fanning the flames of this resentment.

Within this special paper series Gills et al. (2018) describe the Trump presidency as ‘status dysfunction’ outlining the forms of organizational dysfunction within his administration including the poor qualifications of his appointees and the large number of empty positions. Further, they observe that while he has presented himself as ‘deal maker’ he has been incompetent in this respect. As we have argued above, Trump’s overstating of his business acumen is long-standing. However, it is unclear the extent to which this dysfunction is unintentional. Recently, an Interior Department official, speaking to oil exploration companies, praised Trump’s ability to distract the media and the public while actual work was quietly done in the background (Tobias, 2019). Further, the unfilled positions are a component of a plan for further shrinking the federal government. For many in the administration the longest federal shutdown in history was not symptomatic of Trump’s inability to properly govern but, rather, a ‘means to an end’ to limit the size and scope of the federal government by highlighting the limited services that were, in their eyes, truly essential and if frustrated federal workers quit and others increasingly avoided applying for federal positions because of the increasing precarity of previously stable positions, all the better (Rein et al., 2019). It is difficult to use established metrics and expectations to evaluate this administration where it is unclear whether the dysfunction and chaos are intentional or not. The ambiguity of the immigration ban in 2017 which resulted in chaos and protests at airports was intentional. Steve Bannon and executive advisor,

Stephen Miller, consciously sought to foment protests to further inflame the situation (Coppins, 2018). There is a need to consider how to evaluate an administration which, on the one hand, is clearly dysfunctional and inept, but, on the other hand, appears to, at times, use trolling as a strategy of governing.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have presented a critique of Donald Trump and the emerging ideology known as Trumpism by drawing on perspectives from critical management / organization studies and related fields such as business history and leadership studies. It is impossible to understand the contemporary American political landscape without thinking critically about Trump's business career, his leadership style, how he has been marketed to the American public, and how his approach to business is informing the conservative political agenda that his administration is pursuing. We have sought to demonstrate how American politics has been shaped by the intertwining of Trump's approach to business and leadership with narratives of American decline in combination with a populist rhetoric that appeals to voters who *feel* left behind—even if the reality is, in some cases, rather different.

Throughout the Trumpian political project there is a resonance, and rhetorical emphasis, on decline and decay, impending crisis, and a zero-sum (or negative-sum) understanding of economic and social issues. Conservative ideologies hitherto marginal to the mainstream of the American right have been legitimated—in great part via Trump's 'business' celebrity. They are used to justify Trump's ruthless and selfish approach to business and politics (zero/negative-sum, debt manipulation is good, shift risk, and refuse to concede defeat), and as the inspiration for radical and in many cases disturbing political change. The aspects of Trump's business identity that might be assumed to deter voters are precisely the features that entice them. When wrapped up in a rhetoric of 'Making America Great Again', Trump promises an ethno-nationalist (Edwards, 2009) economic transformation to those feeling in a state of decline. We have argued that at the core of President Trump's attractiveness as a candidate in the 2016 Presidential election (and his on-going support among his

political base) are his claims to business acumen, his status as an outsider, his ability to disrupt established power structures, and his critique of contemporary America. Of critical importance here is that Trump provides and represents a considerable body of opinion that America is dis-organized and mis-managed, and that the cure or solution is Trump-ish business leadership in office. As Gould, Bourk and Joullié observe, Trump's appeal is that 'no one had hitherto juxtaposed the conniving and often duplicitous ways of the business manager with those of the inept politician or state official' (Gould, Bourk, and Joullie, 2017: 487).

As we have argued above, Trump's leadership is discursively co-constructed. The concern here is how effectively this constructed narrative has worked to legitimate not only Trump, but also alt-right ideas embedded in this discourse.

What makes Trump a credible vehicle for these trends is that he fits the narratives shaped by the likes of Steve Bannon—of the revolutionary leader who has come to save a nation, and his business career represents (or can be made to represent) a set of leadership traits and cognitive scripts that seem to contrast with the business orthodoxy of neo-liberal conceptions of success: Trump speaks out against trade deals that lead to the flight of jobs overseas. Trump 'loves debt' and making creditors take a haircut; increasing household debt maps to perceptions of national indebtedness and decline. Trump makes money out of decline and decay; he survives against the odds when the 'chips' are down and as a real estate mogul, he managed to make money through the greatest real estate crisis since the Great Depression, which as a national event had scarring effect on perceptions of prosperity and opportunity. Trump's monarchical business leadership style suits those who would break the hold of a faceless plutocratic class in Washington. Amongst a certain group of Americans who feel that the promise of America has been denied to them, he represents winning, or at least its possibility. The extent to which this narrative is real or imagined matters far less than the Presidency that it has created, and the transformations—political, cultural, social, economic—that are occurring in its wake.

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples: the collapse of the US Football League and Trump's team, the New Jersey Generals, in 1985 (D'Antonio, 2016: 223; Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 172–87), Trump Mortgage launched in 2006 and failed following the Global Financial Crisis (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 234–36); and much more recently—the debacle associated with Trump University (Kranish and Fisher, 2016: 225–27).

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Gekko was the fictional representation of rapacious capitalism in Oliver Stone's 1980s film *Wall Street*. His famous aphorism in the film—“greed is good”—has come to signify an approach to business which is unconcerned with wider social and economic consequences (Sutherland, 2015).